

OPENLY GAY ATHLETES:
CONTESTING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN A HOMOPHOBIC ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This research provides the first look into the experiences of openly gay male team sport athletes on ostensibly all heterosexual teams. Although openly gay athletes were free from physical harassment, in the absence of a formal ban against gay athletes, sport resisted their acceptance and attempted to remain a site of orthodox masculine production by creating a culture of silence surrounding gay athleticism, by segmenting their identities, and by persistently using homophobic discourse to discredit homosexuality in general. Sports attempt to tolerate gay male athletes when they contribute to the overarching ethos of sport—winning—but try to taint the creation of a gay identity within sport that would see homosexuality and athleticism as compatible. Still, by proving themselves successful in sport, and meeting most other mandates of hegemonic masculinity except for their sexual identity, gay male athletes show that hegemony is not seamless, and that there exists the possibility to soften hegemonic masculinity in the sporting realm.

Researchers who have examined the issue of gays in sports largely agree that organized sports are a highly homophobic institution (Bryant 2001; Clarke 1998; Griffin 1998; Hekma 1998; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990; Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morphew 2001). Messner (1992, 34) says, “The extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys (in sports) learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not acceptable.” Hekma (1998, 2) states that, “Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise.” And Pronger (1990, 26) agrees, saying: “Many of the (gay) men I interviewed said they were uncomfortable with team sports...orthodox masculinity is usually an important subtext if not *the* leitmotif” in team sports.

Sports (particularly contact sports) have been described as a place in which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined, as an athlete represents the ideal of what it means to be a man, a definition which contrasts what it means to be feminine and/or gay (Connell 1995; Messner 1992). And as women have increasingly gained access to once masculine-dominated institutions, sports have become contested terrain in which men try to validate masculine privilege through their ability to physically out perform women, thus symbolically dominating women (Burton-Nelson 1995).

But, as Griffin (1998) suggests, if gay male athletes, who are stigmatized as being feminine, can be as strong and competitive as heterosexual male athletes, they may threaten the perceived distinctions between gay men and straight men, and thus the perceived differences between men and women as a whole. Bourdieu (2001) maintains that the gay male is uniquely situated to undermine masculine orthodoxy because of his unique ability to invisibly gain access to masculine privilege before coming out as gay. Because of this ability, the gay male may be uniquely positioned to align with feminists in a terrain of progressive coalition politics to

symbolically attack male dominance. Thus, gay male athletes—who are seen as a paradox because they comply with the gendered script of being a man through the physicality involved in sports, but violate another masculine script through the existence of same-sex desires—may threaten sport as a prime site of hegemonic masculinity and masculine privilege.

Homophobia, therefore, presents itself in the form of resistance against the intrusion of a gay sub-culture within sports, and serves as a way of maintaining the rigidity of orthodox masculinity and patriarchy. Sports not only rejects homosexuality, but also venerates hyper-heterosexuality (Hekma 1998; Griffin 1998; Pronger 1990; Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morpew 2001. Gay males are perceived, “largely as deviant and dangerous participants on the sporting turf” in that they defy culturally defined structures of hegemonic masculinity (Clarke 1998, 145).

Drawing upon Gramsci’s (1971) notions of hegemony, in which a cultural group manages a dominant position, I examine two forms of hegemony in relation to gays in sports. First, I draw upon Connell’s (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity, in which one form of masculinity (which includes being exclusively heterosexual and physically powerful) maintains its dominance by suppressing all others. Secondly, by using Butler’s (1990) notions of heterosexual hegemony (in which heterosexuality is viewed as right and proper while homosexuality is stigmatized), I examine the gendering performance of sport and the queer contestation of it.

I look to sport as a site of contestation for the construction and reproduction of masculinity by qualitatively investigating how gay athletes challenge orthodox assumptions of masculinity by publicly coming out as gay within their high school or collegiate athletic teams. I examine how openly gay athletes are affected by homophobia, how they negotiate hegemonic masculinity, and how they operate within a heterosexist institution.

Despite the fact that they are both culturally silenced and are under constant threat of physical violence, gay male athletes define themselves as being treated “well,” perhaps because, as I show, there is a near absence of overt homophobia in the form of physical and verbal abuse. Sport only tolerates openly gay athletes as long as they are valuable to the mantra of athletics—winning. Otherwise sport uses homophobic discourse, the threat of physical violence toward gay athletes, and the silencing of gay identities in order to maintain the virility of masculine hegemony and to prevent the acceptance of homosexuality in general, as well as to prevent the creation of a gay identity that shows homosexuality and athleticism as compatible. The same techniques are used regardless of whether the sport sits atop the masculine hierarchy (e.g., football) or is a marginalized sport (e.g., cross country running).

BACKGROUND

A significant use of sport in recent times has been to reproduce hegemonic masculinity by turning young boys away from qualities associated with femininity or homosexuality and (attempting) to teach them how to be masculine, heterosexual men (Adams 1993; Crosset 1990; Kidd 1987; Parks 1987). In the process, sport has become a leading definer of masculinity in a mass culture that has lost male initiation rituals (Connell 1995; Messner 1992). In fact, throughout the twentieth century sport has served as a test of masculinity in western societies. They remain a bastion of hegemonic masculinity, heterosexism, and homophobia today (Anderson 2000; Connell 1995; Griffin 1998; Hekma 1998; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990).

Although research on gay male athletes is generally limited (Bryant 2001; Hekma 1998; Pronger 1990; Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morpew 2001) research on male athletes who are publicly out with their homosexuality to their ostensibly heterosexual teams has been non-existent. Until now, our best understanding of the relationship between the gay male athlete and

sport has come from researchers who have interviewed closeted gay male athletes (Hekma 1998); from athletes on all-gay teams (Price 2000); and from research on the attitudes held by heterosexual male athletes toward the possibility of openly gay athletes being on their teams (Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morpew 2001). Indeed studying openly gay athletes was not possible in what might be called a first wave of discrimination against gay athletes, because the social sanctions for coming out of the closet were simply too high. This research reflects a second wave of discrimination toward the gay athlete, characterized by a lessening of overt homophobia in recent years (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb 1998).

While none of the previous studies illuminates the circumstances on which openly gay athletes play on heterosexual teams, they do draw attention to the fact that there appears to be more than one type of discrimination against gays in sport. While the most salient form of discrimination may be physical assault or verbal harassment, Pharr (1997) describes another form of discrimination, heterosexism, as the safeguarding the one form of sexuality (heterosexuality) deemed noble, while marginalizing and stigmatizing homosexuality. The operations of heterosexism lead one to believe that the expression of heterosexuality is right, just, and natural, while all other forms of sexuality are immoral, unhealthy, or inferior. Butler (1997) describes another component of discrimination in the use of repetitive homophobic discourse as a form of resistance toward the cultural acceptance of homosexuality. She suggests that this discourse changes the perceptual frameworks of gay identities, so that gay identity itself includes notions of deviance.

Despite the fact that American culture as a whole is rapidly moving away from both forms of homophobia (Loftus 2001), recent studies report that heterosexual athletes take a objectionable view toward the desirability of gay male athletes (Hekma 1998; Price 2000; Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morpew 2001). Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morpew write, “Examining the

overall message from these results, we found hostility to gay men and lesbians on nearly all teams and at all the case study sites. Clearly those in inter-collegiate athletics are generally unwilling to confront and accept homosexuality” (p. 470). They attribute this attitude to the mandates of masculinity, which the informants believed stand in contrast to homosexuality, a hypothesis congruent with older research (Connell 1990; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morphew (2001) believe that when compared to the liberalization of white attitudes regarding race, attitudes held by heterosexual athletes toward homosexuality has been virtually non-progressive. They attribute this to the lack of experience with, or even knowledge of, openly gay male athletes.

Somewhat encouragingly, Price’s (2000) ethnographic study of an English gay men’s rugby team shows when athletes do come out of the closet, the attitudes of their heterosexual opponents change. This is congruent with my own experience as an openly gay coach (Anderson 2000) in that the attitudes of other team’s athletes toward homosexuality slowly improved with each subsequent year I coached. However, Price found that the gay rugby team went through exhaustive measures to present an image of “normality.” Except for their sexual orientation, they attempted to present an image that they were just the same as the other rugby players. Price notes that players were required to conform to heterosexist structures and endure discriminatory practices in order to maintain acceptance in this setting. For example, players self-silenced by suppressing “camp” style language (a gay form of verbal expression and body language) for a more orthodox masculine vernacular, and the club purposefully made little mention of the fact that they were gay when talking to the press. The rugby athletes were also instructed by their coaches to “be respectable” in the locker rooms and not to engage in “horse play” for fear that such play could be laced with camp style behavior.

Research by Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morpew (2001), Hekma (1998) and Price (2000) makes it evident that the transformative potential of gay athletes in sport is neutralized through potentially overt homophobia, and also through covert mechanisms, such as the normalization of homophobic language and the silencing of gay discourse, identity, and behaviors.

Contrary to what many researchers might have predicted (Clarke 1998), and a noteworthy finding in its own right, none of the 26 openly gay athletes in my study were physically assaulted, and only two could recall being verbally harassed. This, however, is not to say that homophobia did not present itself. Indeed, quite the opposite is true; sport was rife with homophobia, although openly gay athletes discounted its importance in assessing how they were treated. The data clearly shows a persistent pattern of homophobia in all sports, regardless of whether the sport was a team sport, individual sport, contact sport, or non-contact sport.

Initially this research set out to account for differences in contact sports (which are generally team sports) versus non-contact sports (which are generally individual sports) as Griffin (1998) has suggested that team sports might reproduce hegemonic masculinity while individual sports might reproduce a more subordinated masculinity. But surprisingly, these two categories did not seem to vary enough in their treatment of gay athletes to warrant further investigation. While I maintain that the type of sport influences how masculinity gets constructed—that graceful or individual sports do not reproduce hegemonic masculinity in the same way that football or hockey does, it seems that once an athlete does come out to a team, the manner in which he is treated is nearly the same, regardless of the sport played, at least in my small sample; so this finding may not be made more generally. And while finding covert discrimination may not be surprising, finding a lack of physical and verbal aggression toward openly gay athletes suggests that the social production of orthodox masculinity in sport is not a perfectly integrated, self-reinforcing system. Quite the opposite, the mere existence of openly

gay male athletes in sport suggests that hegemonic masculinity is not seamless, and that it can and is already beginning to be contested.

METHOD

Finding subjects for this research was difficult as few gay male athletes come out to the community and fewer still come out to their athletic teams. This scarcity is exacerbated by the fact that once an athlete does come out of the closet he is more likely to drop out of sport because he may no longer feel that he needs the false representation of heterosexuality that being an athlete provides (Hekma 1998; Pronger 2000). I located 42 informants, of whom 26 were openly gay on their teams, through a variety of means. The majority of informants came to me through the use of the Internet after I posted queries on gay websites and list-serves. I also obtained informants by keeping e-mails that gay athletes sent to me after I published an article on gay athletes in the August (1999) issue of XY Magazine, a national magazine designed for gay youth.

I conducted this research from a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a way of generating theory from qualitative data (Corbin and Strauss 1990; 1967). I attempted to understand the meanings that actors gave to their social experiences in sport, and grounded theory may be best suited for analyzing the relationship between hegemonic process and the social realities created by human actors in sport (Dilorio 1989). Based in masculinities research, and using Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" as a heuristic tool, this study uses in-depth interviews in order to examine how gender is produced in sport and how openly gay athletes negotiate gender.

Athletes were represented from the following sports: bowling (1), cheerleading (1), crew (3), cross country (8), diving (3), fencing (1), football (6), hockey (1), rodeo (1), rugby (1), soccer (6), speed skating (1), swimming (4), tennis (2), track (12), volleyball (2), waterpolo (3),

wrestling (3). Although 26 of the 42 informants were openly gay on their teams, openly gay athletes were represented in all of the sports mentioned with the exception of water polo. The number of teams represented above (59) is larger than the number of athletes in my sample (42) because some informants participated in more than one sport. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years.

An important characteristic of the sample is that almost all of the interviewees turned out to be exceptional athletes on their teams. In fact, the sample represented a number of state and national champions. This, of course, has serious theoretical implications regarding human capital and the acceptance of gay athletes (which falls outside the scope of this paper) but it shows that the athletes had the chance to prove themselves before coming out; that they had essentially possessed enough of what I call masculinity insurance to be able to withstand the social sanctions of coming out publicly. Another proviso of the sample is that almost all of the athletes were on the team before coming out, so the results may not apply to a gay athlete who had not yet proven himself, and had not already been accepted socially.

The sample included athletes from both contact and non-contact sports, and from all regions of North America. Race was not accounted for because there was not enough variation in the sample as all informants identified as white except one. The sample may have been weighted toward cross country and track athletes because of interest these athletes may have had in the fact that the researcher is an openly gay cross country and track coach. The athletes' names have been changed in order to protect their identity, and the taped interviews are locked to restrict access to all but the principal investigator.

Criteria for inclusion for informants were: (1) athletes had to have participated on high school or college athletic team(s) during the past two years; (2) subjects had to have been aware of their homosexual orientation at the time they played; and (3) they must have competed in the

sport for at least one full season. Bisexual and heterosexual athletes were excluded. The remaining sixteen athletes considered themselves “closeted” on their teams, in that they believed that their teammates were unaware of their homosexual orientation. In order to expand my sample I used data from eight in-depth interviews that were published in Jocks: The stories of America’s gay male athletes by Dan Woog (1998). Although Woog is not an academic researcher, he is a respected and valuable contributor to the field through his journalistic interest in the subject.

I used three different techniques to collect the data. First, I conducted 26 in-depth interviews, mostly by phone. Although I came into the interviews with some preconceptions about what it would be like to be an openly gay athlete on a high school or college team, my intention was to hear the experiences of the athletes and to let the theory develop from the data. To facilitate this, the athletes were questioned in detail about their socialization into sport, why they chose their sport, what their experiences were as a gay athlete, what those experiences meant to them, and how they dealt with homophobia in sport. The interviews were loosely structured, but I maintained a set of topics to use as a guideline. The taped interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes in length. Each tape was then transcribed and the data were coded using an emerging set of themes.

While sport has been shown to be homophobic for both gay and lesbian athletes (Griffin 1998) there are important differences between the two. Female athleticism in itself is a contradiction to femininity so female athlete are frequently assumed lesbian. Because of these differences I have chosen to examine the gay male athlete only, so my findings cannot be fully generalized. Findings are listed in order of the major emergent themes of the data.

COMING OUT

Given the homophobia of American society one would hardly expect gay athletes to report positive experiences coming out to their teams. Ryan contradicts this stereotype. A 19-year-old first year student at a private university in California, (a progressive state on gay issues) he came out to his crew team in a rather public manner. Ryan tried out for the team while wearing gay pride jewelry. His petite frame and leadership skills made him perfect for the position he occupies as a coxswain where his job is to order eight 200-pound athletes to row “faster” or “harder.” He yells at them, “Get your fucking oar in sync!” Yet, Ryan reports never having once heard a negative comment from them.

“The whole school knows about me, so from the first day of practice the team also knew about me.” His comment gives credence to Griffin’s (1998) argument that athletes on teams in schools that already have a strong support structure for gays and lesbians will have an easier time than those who are not. “I thought the real test would be when we were out on the road, when we had to share a bed. That was when it would come down to it,” he said. And when the bedding situation worked out to where only three athletes needed to share a room, with two beds per room, one person could have their own bed. But the rowers did not want that bed to go to Ryan. They feared that not sharing a bed with him would send a message that they were homophobic. “We talked about it for a while, and we just pushed the two beds together and made one big one. That way nobody felt bad,” Ryan said.

Ryan’s experience was the notable exception for the 26 openly gay athletes. It may have been made better by the public manner in which he came out, the liberal attitudes of his coach and school, and by the fact that the position he occupied in this sport is one that is often occupied by a woman so his teammates were used to being ordered around by people who are further

removed from the hegemonic form of masculinity. Still, Ryan's story helps illustrate that there is no one universal experience when coming out of the closet.

Most of the athletes I interviewed were unexpectedly pleased with their coming out experience. I asked, "If you could do it all over again, what, if anything, would you do differently?" Most of the subjects reported that they would have come out earlier, because it was not as difficult as they had thought it would be. One athlete said, "It was so much easier than I thought. Now I look back and wonder why the hell I didn't do it sooner." And another said, "I forgot what I was supposed to be so worried about after I came out."

But these informants may have over-generalized how well things were. Further discussion with the informants, with the notable exception of Ryan, brought up less positive experiences. For example, one of the subjects, Gabriel, initially spoke of his coming out experience in glowing terms. He came out after two of his fellow teammates already had, and said that his overall experience was "very good." He even praised his coach and teammates for their support:

The first people I came out to were actually runners, and my coach. I went to a private school and one day we were sitting around talking...and a runner came out to us...so I did too...From then, I was able to open up to other runners...And no one really had a problem or an issue with the fact that we were gay.

Gabriel went on to tell me about his state finals 1600 meter relay race:

My friend (also openly gay) and I were approached by our other two (heterosexual) teammates right before the final race. They reached into their bag and pulled out two pairs of gay pride socks and said that they wanted us to wear them. We were really touched. And then they pulled out two more pairs and said that they were going to wear them in support of us."

Gabriel's experience seemed truly positive to him, especially in broad retrospect. But when I asked him for a more detailed account about his initial coming out he recalled that all was not that blissful. Contradicting his earlier positive assessment, he indicated that he had actually lost a friend when word spread about his sexuality:

We were at camp, and we had been around these guys for years, and someone had found out that we were gay and had a fit over it. I was kind of hurt by it. Certain things that were said were out of place. This individual completely left the camp and did not run that year because of what his friends would think because he was running with us...I'd say he was one of our good friends...he no longer spoke to me.

Gabriel typified how the athletes relayed their experiences to me. They began by speaking of their experience as a general positive, praising their teammates, and talking about how well accepted they felt. But when I began to inquire further as to just "how" they were treated, when I began asking questions about their overnight trips, the way their teams treated their lovers, or how their teams talked about their homosexuality, a different story emerged. I heard stories of extreme heterosexism, silencing, and the frequent use of homophobic discourse. But the pattern of athletes being in high spirits about their coming out was almost universal among the informants. They seemed unbothered, and mostly unaware of the high degree of heterosexism and homophobic discourse that their stories often revealed.

What truly surprised me, however, was that even when I pointed out the inequality to the informants, they still did not seem to feel the impact of having been discriminated against. There was obviously something else occurring here. Something was preventing these athletes from

feeling the large degree of discrimination they encountered, and from seeing it when I pointed it out to them.

Whereas sociologists usually discuss people who compare themselves to those who have it better (Davies 1962; Tilly 1978) these athletes seemed to compare themselves to those who had it worse. It is often the fear of what might happen when gay athletes come out that enhances their sense of well being, even if all was not well. In essence, I found a reverse relative deprivation occurring with the informants. Things seemed to go well for them in comparison to what might have been.

Before coming out, the athletes I interviewed largely saw their sport as being highly homophobic, as judged primarily through the unbridled use of homophobic discourse. But after coming out of the closet, the athletes were greeted by a much more hospitable team than they had imagined. Like most, Jason, a high school cross country and track runner, feared that coming out to his teammates would be a difficult and possibly dangerous event:

One of the things that was holding me back from coming out was, like, my own fear of locker room situations. Because in my mind I didn't want to make other people uncomfortable around me in the locker room, and I didn't want them to make it an issue...I'd heard some horror stories from some of my friends...one of my friend's friend was beaten to a bloody pulp because they thought he was gay.

Steve, another high school cross country and track runner, also feared coming out: "I didn't know how they would react or what they would say...It's like the fear of rejection, I guess." And Charlie, a high school football player, who was outed to his teammates against his will, reports his outing as having been "positive," even "a relief," despite the fact that a few of his teammates decided they could no longer talk to him:

Well, at first I didn't want to go to practice, 'cause I was scared about what was gonna happen. But my coaches came to me and said, "Don't worry it's gonna be OK; they (teammates) like you a lot." So I went out there, and I was kinda scared, but everyone kept being the same. You know, they kept being my friends, and there were like only two or three that stopped talking to me...and one of them, I used to be best friends with him...and as soon as he found out he stopped talking to me.

Charlie defined having only "two or three" players stop talking to him because of his sexual orientation as a good result, because Charlie had expected to lose all his teammates' friendships.

The fear of violence or a negative response by athletes to one's homosexuality may partially come from the fact that athletes are often the unofficial rule enforcers of hegemonic masculinity in school settings (Bissinger 1990; Miracle and Rees 1994; Wilson 2002) and even gay non-athletes may fear homophobia from athletes. For example, Derek, who came out to his school before joining a team said, "I didn't have any problems at the school, even from the people on the sports teams," indicating that he had expected the athletes to be less accepting than the school population at large.

The fear of violence is justified. I once coached a heterosexual track athlete who was physically beaten by a member of the school's football team who assumed him to be gay. A 250-pound football player sat upon him and beat him, fracturing four facial bones, and trying to gouge his eyes out with his fingers as he yelled, "I'm going to kill you, you fucking cross country faggot" simply because his coach was gay (Anderson 2000). And, recall Jason describing how one of his friends was "beaten to a bloody pulp" because some athletes thought he too was gay.

Herek and Berrill (1992) describe these types of events as hate crimes, because they send a message to all in the gay community to, "watch out, this can happen to you," effectively

terrorizing an entire community. And while my study had no such cases of physical abuse to report, the highly publicized story of Greg Congdon, a high school football player in a small Pennsylvania town, helps spread fear to all gay athletes.

Greg, an average football player, was outed against his will after a suicide attempt. The word soon got back to his teammates and despite the fact that Greg had been their close friend, he was shunned and threatened with physical violence if he were to return to the team (Greg never competed on a team as an openly gay athlete). His story was covered by ESPN and I interviewed him after seeing it. “I walked into the school and I started getting shoved around, and pushed around. My friends wouldn’t talk to me, so that kind of made me really hate myself more. Like, I was told that if I played any sports, that they’d make my life living hell...” Teammates drove by Greg’s house at night shouting homophobic and threatening taunts, and his teammates, coaches, and even his best friends all ceased conversing with him, effectively marginalizing him from his community.

Greg’s story, and the story of my athlete, highlights how severe intolerance of gay athletes can be. But Greg’s story is, by far the worst of all the subjects I interviewed. While my sample is too small and unrepresentative to make the claim that physical aggression and verbal harassment toward openly gay males in high school and college sports does not happen, it does show that sport is not always overtly homophobic. These results seem not only different from what researchers have predicted, but also different than what many of the athletes had expected. It is these fears that inflated the sense of well being among the informants, resulting in a reverse relative deprivation.

SEGMENTED IDENTITIES

I talked to Tim, an openly gay tennis player, and asked him if he was treated any different after coming out. “No.” He said. They didn’t really treat me as gay, if that’s what you mean. In fact, they didn’t even mention it really. They just treated me like one of the guys and stuff. Sorta like nothing had changed or anything.” I then asked him if this included verbal sexualizing of women. “Yeah, they ask me like who I think is hot and stuff.” But when I asked Tim if they ever asked him what guys he thought was hot he replied, “Hell no. They’d never do that. They don’t want to hear that kind of stuff.”

Tim’s experience is one of a segmented identity. His teammates know he is gay, but don’t treat him as if he were. They are willing to recognize his athletic accomplishments, but unwilling to talk of his social/sexual life as they do with the heterosexual athletes. Perhaps his teammates think they are doing what is best for Tim, and perhaps Tim thinks it is what is best too. But the situation is one of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” a compromise that allows gay athletes to reveal their true sexual orientation (at least once), but allows heterosexual athletes to pretend that nothing has changed – thus denying the gay athletes true identity.

Ken, an NCAA champion track runner, illustrated the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy well when he said:

And even to this day, people know, but people just won’t say it... It’s like they just can’t talk about it. It makes me so uncomfortable knowing that some people know but then they still ask me about girls...it’s really frustrating...Not one time on the team did anyone ask me, ‘Ken, are you gay?’

Most of the time, however, the gay athletes failed to recognize that their identities were being denied, and they often took part in their own oppression by self-silencing and partaking in

heterosexual dialogue. Jeff, a college cross country runner and soccer player, illustrates collusion in his own oppression when he informed me that he frequently engaged in conversations about women with them, as if he were heterosexual. “The guys will be talking about girls and stuff, and they will ask me what I think of somebody, and I’ll just say, yeah, she’s hot, or something like that.”

Victimized by a hegemony that resists discourse on homosexuality, gay athletes often view their silencing as acceptable and accept a negotiated, segmented identity that contributes to their own culture of silence (Hekma 1998). One reason is that athletes, either out of fear of physical hostility or discrimination, are simply too afraid to talk much about their sexuality (Griffin 1998). Or, athletes may not know why they don’t discuss their sexuality, they just feel that it is not right for them to discuss their sexuality on par with heterosexual athletes. Gay athletes often excuse their lack of discussion of their sexual orientation by saying what Frank said to me, “Sport is not the appropriate place for such discussions.” He later added, “Well, it’s none of their business.” And, Rob, a crew athlete who came out implicitly to his team by snuggling with another guy in a cold boathouse, said that he never really talked about it after that. When I asked him why, he replied, “I just didn’t feel it was necessary. It never really came up. I mean I didn’t jump out of the closet at them, or force my homosexuality on them.” A runner said, “The gay thing was never talked about because we ran together; we enjoyed running cross country and that was the extent of it.”

Rob’s use of the phrase “forcing my homosexuality” to describe a simple affirmation of his sexuality, and the runner’s phrase “the gay thing” take on tones of heterosexual hegemony in which any proclamation of heterosexuality is “just” and “right” and never scrutinized, but the mere mention of homosexuality is perceived as being “in your face” (Butler 1990; Connell 1995; Messner 1992; Pharr 1997; Pronger 1990; Pronger 2000). Presumably, it is perceived as being

“in your face” because it opens up a door to the development of a gay culture within sport or because it legitimates homosexuality. Perhaps this is why the informants failed to see that their teams often followed a norm of not talking about their sexual identity, or social/sexual life, even when the team talked openly about the sexual identity or social/sexual lives of their heterosexual counterparts. Whatever the reason, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy not only existed between gay athletes and their straight teammates, but surprisingly it also existed between gay athletes themselves. One athlete described the sport of diving to me as “a gay Mecca,” but with the unusual twist that “nobody talks about it.” He said, “Everyone knows about everyone else, but no one talks about it...it’s not a big gay thing, you go, you dive and you leave.”

HOMOPHOBIC DISCOURSE

Frank, an openly gay football player told me that he was surprised at how well he was received on his team, because his teammates had used such a high degree of homophobic discourse on his team before he came out:

I couldn’t believe how cool the guys were with me. I mean I expected them to be really un-accepting of me because they’d called me a fag for so long. I mean, they call everyone a fag, so its not like they thought I was gay or anything, but still I thought that when they found out I really was, you know gay, that they’d hate me.

When I asked him if they still call him a fag now that he came out he responded, “No. Not really. I mean, every now and then they might say it, but they usually apologize and say that they didn’t mean it that way.”

Athletes in my study commonly heard one heterosexual teammate say to another, “knock it off, fag” as a form of either venting frustration with another, or in a supposed jocular manner.

One football player told me, “Oh yeah, I hear fag all the time.” When I asked him if he used the

word “fag” the way his teammates do he replied, “No. No. I did before I came out of the closet, but not now.” And when I asked why he responded, “I don’t know. I guess it’s just not cool.”

Furthermore, none of the athletes in my sample reported being called a fag in a harassing or violent manner (Greg wasn’t part of my sample because he had not actually competed as an openly gay athlete). They may have heard, “hurry up fag” but they did not hear, “knock it off you faggot.” In fact, most of the athletes reported that their heterosexual teammates tried not to use the word “fag” in associated with them at all, even if they did continue to use it as an insult amongst each other.

But despite the attempts of some of their teammates to reduce homophobic discourse through use of the word “fag,” most informants reported much less sensitivity toward their teammates use of the word “gay.” Frank said, “Oh yeah, they say everything is gay if they don’t like it. I mean, if you’re being dumb, they say, ‘don’t be gay,’ and if your team was given a penalty unfairly they say, ‘that’s so gay.’” Ken said, “They say, ‘this is gay,’ and ‘that’s gay,’ but they don’t mean it like that,” even though Ken reports not using the word in such manner himself. In fact, none of the informant strongly objected to the use of the word “gay” by their teammates to describe things distasteful, even though they didn’t use the word in such manner themselves.

These findings are consistent with that of both Hekma (1998) and Price (2000) who each found that gay athletes frequently hear anti-gay language spoken by their heterosexual teammates and opponents, yet they report that the gay athletes themselves do not necessarily view this language as being homophobic. Price (2000) argues that homophobic language takes on a significantly different meaning, as it appears to be an accepted element of the game. And, Hekma found that anti-gay verbal harassment was reported so frequently that gay athletes treated it casually, dismissing it by saying, “they didn’t really mean anything by it.”

Many of the openly gay athletes I interviewed did not seem to take offense to the use of the words “fag” or “gay,” justifying their use in the same way that Hekma (1998) found by saying, “Oh, they didn’t mean it that way.” But unlike Hekma’s (1998) findings, not all athletes dismissed the hostile capacity of such discourse in my sample. Specifically, many of the closeted athletes felt that it created a hostile environment, and they used such discourse to gauge the level of comfort their teams maintained toward homosexuality. Indeed, most of the closeted athletes I interviewed reported to me that one of the reasons they had not come out was because they perceived their teammates as being highly homophobic as evidenced by homophobic discourse. Jon, a closeted high school football player described his sport as “the most homophobic” by saying that “everything was fag this and fag that.” And one openly gay informant said to me that before he came out he feared doing so because of the degree of homophobic discourse he heard on his team, “I was totally afraid to come out to my teammates, I mean they are always calling other people fags and stuff.”

Highlighting the operation of discourse in discrimination, Thorne (1998), McGuffey and Rich (1999), Davis (1990), and Adams (1993) have all shown that the primary way to maximize the influence of hegemonic masculinity is for one male to call another a “fag” or accuse him of being “gay.” Even if one does not “seriously” think the other to be gay, by stigmatizing another male, a male shows that he is meeting at least one mandate of hegemonic masculinity—that of being heterosexual—while raising his social status at the expense of another.

Interestingly, almost all of the athletes reported hearing frequent use of the word “fag,” regardless of whether they played a contact or non-contact sport. Therefore, members of lower status sports like cross country or tennis seem to borrow the same tools of orthodox masculinization and hegemony as members of higher status sports like football.

I posit that such behavior is rooted in the fact that it is truly impossible for one to “prove” that he is heterosexual, as it is commonly known that gay males frequently “pass” by having sexual and romantic liaisons with women. In the narrow field of sport, where heterosexuality is compulsory, and homosexuality is taboo, effeminacy and gayness are essentially considered the same. Thus, regardless of the true sexual orientation of the individual in question, the word “fag” serves to relegate one to the sphere of being “a lesser man,” a position that brings much strife. In fact, Adams (1993) credits the stress of always being thought gay for the early retirement of several professional figure skaters.

What my research does not answer is just why some gay athletes felt that homophobic discourse created an air of hostility toward them, while others did not. Perhaps it is because athletes who come out, or were outed, discovered unexpected acceptance levels that blinded them to the homophobic discourse. Or perhaps it is because the openly gay athletes in my study were so good (they were almost exclusively the best on their teams) that they did not perceive the discourse of “fag” as pertaining to them because they approximated many of the mandates of hegemonic masculinity through their athleticism.

CONCLUSION

Male sports have been described as a mainstay for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. But openly gay athletes, even though they may conform to all other mandates of orthodox masculinity with the exception their sexuality, threaten the ability of sports to reproduce the hegemonic form of masculinity. Rather, gay male athletes, especially those who prove to be as good or better than heterosexual athletes, threaten to soften hegemonic masculinity. In doing so, they may help open the doors to increased acceptance of subjugated masculinities, such as gay identities, and perhaps even the acceptance of female athleticism.

In this research, the first ever conducted on openly gay high school and collegiate athletes, I examined how openly gay athletes negotiated hegemonic masculinity in a homophobic environment. I found that openly gay athletes were generally surprised by how well they were treated. They frequently credited their coaches and teammates as being open-minded and accepting. However, these athletes may have overstated their acceptance because they were treated better than they had expected to be. This reverse relative deprivation was largely influenced by the fact that they were not physically assaulted or verbally harassed—the opposite of what most expected before coming out.

However, to show that these athletes encountered little physical or verbal hostility is not to say that there was an absence of homophobia in sports. Indeed, homophobia appeared in many ways, including the presence of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in which gay athletes’ sexual identities were not treated on par with that of heterosexual athletes. In fact, heterosexual discourse is so pervasive in sport that it subtly leads gay athletes to feel that they have no right to discuss their sexuality, despite the overflowing discussions of heterosexuality around them.

In this manner sport is not unlike the United States military, another highly masculinized institution, which bans openly gay and lesbian soldiers under the now famous 1994 U.S. military policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Britton and Williams (1995) show that the silencing of gays and lesbians in the U.S. Armed Services reflects institutional and cultural privileging of a heterosexual masculine ideal. Through the use of sanctions and consciousness control, the U.S. military attempts to insure the reproduction of soldiers as hegemonically masculine. Comparing the situation of openly gay athletes to that of the U.S. military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy highlights that what cannot be discussed is just as powerful a weapon of heterosexual hegemony as what can be discussed.

In the absence of the ability to ban openly gay athletes from sport, heterosexual athletes within team sports, both contact and non-contact resisted the intrusion of openly gay athletes through the creation of a culture of silence around gay identities. Although publicly out, the informants in this study were victimized by heterosexual hegemony and largely maintained a heteronormative framework by self-silencing their speech, and frequently engaged in heterosexual dialogue with their heterosexual teammates. The combined effect of the attempted silencing of gay identities within sport, and the willful promotion of heterosexuality serves to venerate heterosexuality, while marginalizing homosexuality (Butler 1990; Connell 1995; Messner and Sabo 1990; Pronger 1990) and prevents the association of homosexuality as being compatible with athleticism.

The heteronormativity of sport was further maintained through the use of homophobic discourse geared to discredit homosexuality and consign it as something loathsome. Heterosexual athletes habitually ostracized other (assumed heterosexual) athletes by calling them a “fag” and referred to unjust situations as being “gay”—an occurrence that happened so often that many of the gay athletes dismissed the harmful potential of such discourse. Homophobic discourse as an acceptable expression also perpetuates heterosexual hegemony and dominance and is powerful in preventing the softening of hegemonic masculinity.

I theorize that the normalization of homophobic dialogue in American sport serves to subjugate the gay male identity as an inferior form of masculinity, and helps marginalize gay athletes so that they must maintain segmented identities. Gay athletes identities as “athletes” are accepted but their identities as “gay” are not. In contrast, heterosexual athletes more closely conform to hegemonic masculinity, so their identities as “heterosexual” and “athlete” are nearly synonymous.

Butler (1997) suggests that this anti-gay discourse is part of a larger heterosexist framework, which inhibits the acceptance of homosexuality. I add that by creating a hostile environment toward the acceptance of homosexuality, even before the team is made aware of the actual presences of a gay athlete on the team, such discourse helps protect the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity from the threat of gay athleticism. It sends a message that homosexuality is not welcomed. This homophobic discourse has proven to be as effective as an all-out ban on gay athletes from sport (Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morpew 2001).

Taken together, the creation of a culture of silence, combined with the normalization of anti-gay discourse, makes it difficult for gay male athletes to establish social connections within the sport that are necessary for the production of a positive gay athlete identity, one that would view homosexuality and athleticism as compatible. So while I may have found a near-lack of overt discrimination against openly gay athletes, sports, whether they are contact or non-contact, remain steadfast in their reproduction of heterosexual hegemony and hegemonic masculinity.

Still, heterosexual athletes do allow for some gay males to participate within sport, and one could argue that the mere presence of openly gay males in sport suggests that the antecedents are there for the development of a gay identity within. Just why these particular gay athletes have been permitted within sport is an important question. And the answer, I maintain, is that heterosexual athletes are willing to tolerate gay athletes if they comply with the overarching motif of sport—winning. The openly gay male athletes in this study were all the best on their teams, while the closeted gay male athletes represented more average athletic abilities. Thus gay athletes essentially had enough masculinity insurance to withstand the blast of coming out of the closet, and their heterosexual teammates allowed them to exist without overt discrimination because they helped their teams win. Yet these openly gay athletes are really neither welcomed nor accepted; rather, they appear to be merely tolerated, and one would certainly wonder how an

athlete would be treated who came out as an openly gay benchwarmer. As one athlete described to me, “you don’t mess with the best.” Of course, in this case I might add, “you don’t mess with the best,” as long as they comply with the masculine norms of dominance, competitiveness and winning, and the other mandates of hegemonic masculinity including, “don’t ask, don’t tell” silence about their sexual identity.

Finally, the data suggests that while heterosexual athletes are not likely to accept the creation of a substantial gay sub-culture anytime soon, gay athletes are beginning to contest sport as a site of hegemonic masculine production. Perhaps most encouraging is the fact that I could conduct this research at all, that there is a new phenomenon of openly gay male athletes coming out in high school and collegiate sports. This suggests that hegemony in the athletic arena is not seamless, and sport will remain contested terrain for years to come.

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